

Kalavryta

A starting point
towards many
sensations

*When you sail for Ithaca,
wish that your trip be long,
full of adventures, full of knowledge*
.....

*Wish that your trip be long.
Many a summer mornings arrive
that with joy and pleasure
you enter into ports you've never seen before,*
.....

From «Ithaca» by Kon. Kavafis



chia Vlachou-Batsi

You've never seen before' - these magical words by Kavafis open up horizons, create dreams, and spread hopes either metaphorically or literally. They generate expectations and promises that we, too, some day will really greet 'first seen' places. The exploration of the unknown is a great moment, but the return to known things hides a different kind of emotion. This time, our destination is

Kalavryta, the beautiful and historic town of the Peloponnese. It is a town that can offer us memories and happiness even in the middle of the winter; because Greece is not just islands and swimming in the sea, it is not just night life, it is also relaxation and knowledge.

Setting off from Kalavryta, we will begin our expeditions to the surrounding areas, which are equally beautiful and historically interesting.

But before we begin let's say a few words about the city's history.

HISTORICAL DATA

Kalavryta overlooks the plain from a small plateau surrounded by the snowy peaks of Helmos, Panahaiko, and Erymanthos. Kalavryta is situated where ancient Kinetha used to be. In the Middle Ages it was known with by its present name, probably due to the abundance of water springs in the area.

Etymologically, the word is made up from kala+vryta which means 'good waters'.

In the beginning of the 13th century it was conquered by the French and became a barony. Remnants of the Oria castle still lie on the top of the



hill that towers above the town. One of the two most important chapters in the history of Kalavryta is the war of independence of 1821. According to tradition, the revolution started on 23rd March 1821 in the monastery of Agia Lavra, where Archbishop Germanos of Patras raised the banner of the revolution. The second important event was that of 13th December 1943, when the Germans executed all the men above 13 and set the town on fire in an act of reprisal. A memorial for those men stands at the location

where the executions took place. Kalavryta, with its 2 500 inhabitants, is the most important settlement in the area, and in recent years it has been developing into a tourist centre, as the ski resort, which is only 14 km away, offers ideal facilities.

Kalavryta has a lot to offer the visitor: quiet strolls under the coolness of the plane trees, brisk walks in Vouraikos gorge, skiing in winter, a visit to the cave of the Lakes, mountain cycling in the game reserve of Souvardos, pilgrimage to the monasteries of Agia Lavra and Mega Spileo and good food at the traditional tavernas in the area. But, before we start our exploration of the area, let's go for a walk around the town.

A WALK AROUND THE TOWN

Kalavryta is a small hospitable town with paved pedestrian precincts, squares, and tall trees that look so romantic when their branches are bare in the winter but which are also cool and beautiful in the summer when their leaves are dense and green. In the centre of the town we will find the **Museum of the Holocaust**, housed in the old Primary school of the area, and the dilapidated 'Palace of Paleologina'



which reveals the relationship of Kalavryta with Byzantium. On the central square stands the church of the **Koimesis** (the death and assumption) of the **Virgin Mary**. As soon as we arrive at 'Helmos' hotel we can relax under the old plane tree and secretly listen to its history. This tree is called '**the plane of the three Old Men**' because, according to tradition, three of the pioneers of the Greek War of Independence, Zaimis, Petimezas and Fotilas, met beneath its shade.

After this pleasant wander around the town, and before we set off for our first destination, let's sit in the pedestrian precinct to have a coffee and eat one of these amazing cheese or cream pies or a fantastic caramel cream. We will begin our trip from the historical Agia Lavra.

AGIA LAVRA

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From up there we can enjoy a view of the serene plain – a green sea during the winter that turns into a multi-coloured one during the summer.

The monastery of Agia Lavra is one of the most important historical places in our country, and still maintains a strong presence. The

landscape around the monastery is particularly beautiful, as the terrain formations create unusual variations that one can enjoy right from the beginning of their visit.

As far as the foundation of the monastery is concerned, the evidence leads us to the 10th century when Athanasios Athonities founded the old monastery during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor, Nicephorus Phocas. Construction began in 961 in a location called the 'old monastery', 300 metres west of the actual monastery. This first monastery was totally ruined by fire in 1585. Ioannis, a virtuous tailor from kalavryta who denied all his earthly possessions and became a monk, rebuilt the monastery. In 1689 the monastery was transferred to its current position.

In 1772, right after the Orloff events, the monastery was destroyed by Albanians who had been offered shelter there. From that moment on and until 1821 the monastery was attacked on several occasions. The monastery assumed its present form in 1821. It was the place where **Archbishop Germanos of Patras** took shelter



and it was there where, together with other notables, he declared the beginning of the fight on 21st March 1821. Ibrahim set the monastery on fire in 1826. The frescoes survived the fire but they lost their initial colours. The monastery was rebuilt on its current site in 1828 and the church was repaired in 1898, since further destruction had taken place. In 1943, during the German occupation, the monastery was set on fire once again.

The **Holly Banner** of the revolution that Archbishop Germanos of Patras raised is kept in a showcase in the monastery together with other sacred relics. To the left of the entrance, the 600-year-old plane tree stretches its aged branches. It was under its shade that the fighters sat down to eat after they had taken an oath to the Banner of the Revolution in 1821. Before we leave this magical place behind us, it is really worth visiting the Paleomonastiro, which is carved into the rock and waits to show us round its 17th-century frescoes.

A kilometer further we will greet the Panhellenic Memorial for the fighters of 1821. Leaving this beautiful and memory-loaded landscape behind us, we head south.

LOUSSI

SOUDENA – ANCIENT LOUSSI

Ascending towards the ski centre, we come across a junction. The road on the left leads to the ski centre, but we are not going there today. Of course, we are not going to leave Kalavryta without experiencing the magic of the snow and the enjoyment of playing around on the well-organised slopes, which cater for young and old, beginners and experts. We go straight ahead and, after a



while, the beautiful and lush valley of Soudena stretches out in front of us in the midst of a deafening silence. The road winds downwards and after going through **Ano Loussi** it reaches Soudena or Kato Loussi, a traditional settlement with many stone-made houses. **Kato Loussi** is the hometown of Petimeza's, an 1821 leader. The family's tower, which is an example of the tower residences used during Turkish occupation, is in a very good condition. The small

windows, the turret with the loophole above the attic and the large circular tower, which is integrated into the building, make it look like a fortress. In Kato Loussi there is a junction and a signpost which directs us through the valley to the archaeological site of ancient Loussi. The Austrian Archaeological Institute of Athens started excavations there in 1898, to explore the temple of Artemis. Remnants can be found all over the



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slope of verdant Prophet Elias, which separates this plateau from the Klitoria one in the north. The findings are many and valuable and, until a museum is built in Loussi, they are kept by the Antiquities Service of Patras. Apart from the archaeological merit of the place, the beauty of nature captivates the visitor. Leaving Loussi behind us, we head south.

THE CAVE OF THE LAKES

Continuing along the road straight down from Kato Loussi and

towards Klitoria, we go through Kastria village, where the **cave of the Lakes** is. A stop here will be a pleasant surprise for us. The cave, which is embraced by nature, seems well protected against the weather and people.

In older times, the cave was the bank of a subterranean river. Its waters came from the 'Apanokampos' plateau, which is higher up at a distance of 4km. As the centuries passed, the erosive power of the waters opened up passages at lower levels. The waters that exist in the cave today come

from small springs on the walls and the roof of the cave that give water in periods of rainfall. In other seasons, the cave retains water in 13 terraced lakes, which is where its contemporary name comes from.

The cave has been explored to a length of 1980 metres.

At the moment, one can visit a length of only 350 of these metres.

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A 40-metre tunnel that leads directly to the second floor has been opened up on the slope, 23 m. above the natural entrance, so that the cave can be visited more easily. The temperature inside the cave is steady and fluctuates between 13 and 16_ C. Human and animal bones have been found in the lower floor of the cave – the bones of a hippopotamus that were also found there are of immense paleontological value and are kept in the Paleontological Museum of Athens. Moreover, a significant number of shells from the Neolithic and Protohellenic period have also been unearthed. It is intended that



this section of the cave is intended will become a bio-speleological laboratory of international fame.

PLANITERO

Further down, at the junction, we turn left towards **Planitero**. Three and a half kilometers later, we reach the source of the river Aroanios on the slopes of Helmos. The landscape helps the visitor relax. The Aroanios flows wildly under the plane trees, whose leaves are impenetrable for the summer sun, while in winter, when they wither and fall, they create a tile-red carpet that covers the whole area. Taverns and grill-houses that offer grilled trout and salmon from the area's fish farms stand along the banks of the river. On the path which runs along the bank, there are small shacks where one can buy aromatic plants and herbs, pasta from local home manufacturers, and artificial flowers.



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KLITORIA

Going back to the central road, we head south to walk around the beautiful village of **Klitoria**, which stands on the remnants of the ancient village of Klitor, and to enjoy a coffee in its huge town square. However, we must not leave before visiting the wonderful museum of **Folk Art and Tradition**, which is run by the cultural club of the village and where we can find a rich collection of all sorts of objects. Our trip around the south ends here. There are other routes, equally charming, that wait for us. For this reason, we are returning to Kalavryta to have a good night's rest and tomorrow morning we will head for the mountains.

SKI CENTRE

We got up in a great mood and we

are going up the mountain. Our destination is Kalavryta's ski centre, which is perched on the Aroania mountains, Helmos' other name. The mountains stretch west of Ziria, they have many peaks and a general layout which resembles the shape of a horseshoe, thus surrounding the legendary gorge of the Styx. Here, the myth kindles our imagination strangely and we cannot but stay there and explore everything.

The ski centre of Kalavryta is on the north-west side of Helmos, in a location called **Vathia Lakka** at an altitude of between 1650 and 2150 metres. It is 14 km. away from Kalavryta and 200 km away from Athens and can be reached by car, bus or train even for a day trip. It

was founded in November 1988 and it has been operating as a municipal business ever since. It has changed significantly over the last four years. Today, it has twelve slopes of all categories – two very difficult ones, five difficult ones, three easy ones and two which are very easy. The slopes are served by seven lifts – two for beginners, two chairlifts and three sliding ones, which together can carry 5 000 people per hour. In addition, there are two reception buildings where skiers and visitors can enjoy the view of the snowy landscape while drinking their coffee.

The main period during which the centre operates extends from the middle of December to the end of April. The ski resort of Kalavryta is the closest one to Athens, so even a day-trip is feasible. However, its most impressive advantage is that it can offer people the chance to ski down the highest peaks of Helmos while, at the same time, enjoying a magnificent view of the sea, since the whole of the Corinthian gulf can be seen from the middle level up. This is a unique sensation. Particularly from April onwards, climbers and visitors have the opportunity to ski in the morning and later on enjoy a swim on the beaches of Akrata or Trapeza or even go to Diakofto beach on the

cog train. This is something that many Greek visitors already do. One of the most breathtaking experiences that the ski centre can offer is night skiing on the slope of Daphne, coupled with the party that follows in the chalet. This activity was tried out last year and the people's response was enthusiastic. So it is expected that this free skiing will be permitted every Saturday evening between

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seven and eleven o'clock. Moreover, the visitor can go across a large part of the snowy plateau of Xerokampos on a rented snowmobile and see many of the mountain's wild animals. What is also very handy for the visitors is that another small three-seat lift – of the Achilles' chair type – has been installed in the parking area and, upon buying their tickets, visitors will be able to go straight onto the lift. Another small and very original lift, which uses some special tubes, has also been installed. A unique park will be created in this area where one will be able to roll on the snow without necessarily having to ski or snowboard. It seems that it is going to be very successful, since almost 30% of the visitors do not do any winter sports but come here just to enjoy the snow.

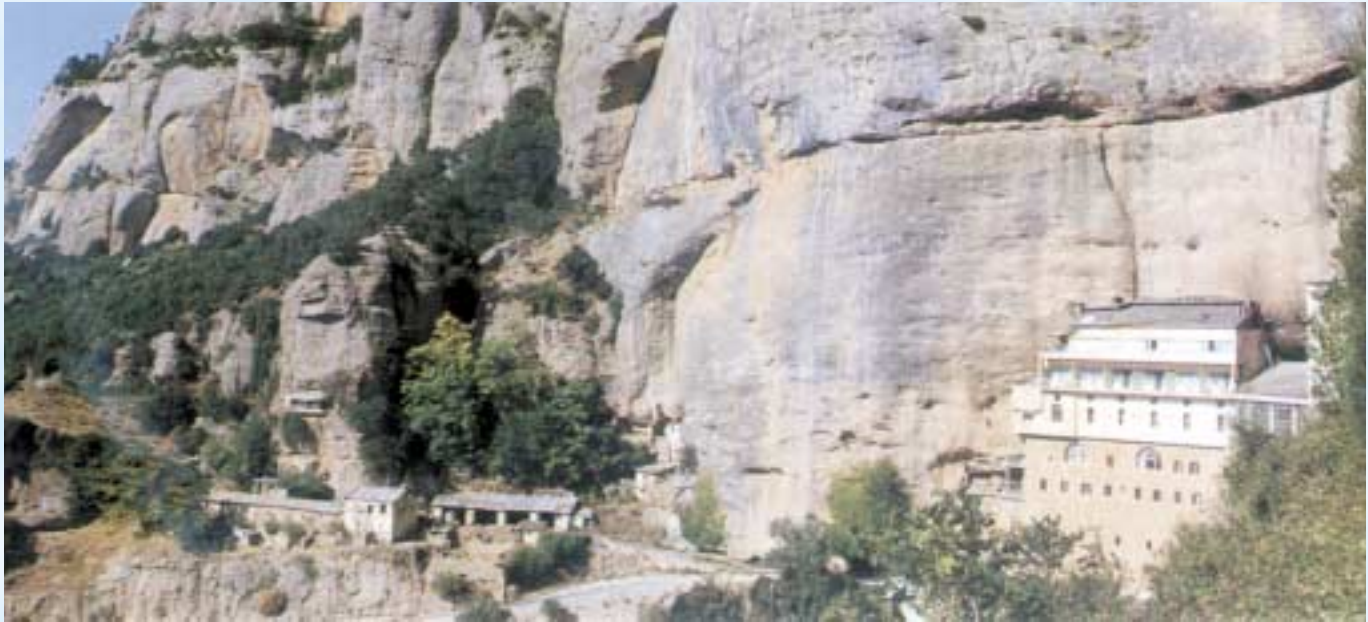
Before we go back to our base, we must not forget to visit the very beautiful Tsivloul Lake and the traditional monastery of Mega Spileo, which is well worth seeing, and to take a ride on the fantastic unique cog train.

Let us start from Mega Spileo.

MEGA SPILEO

We drive along the road that connects Kalavryta with the national road of Athens-Patras. 10





km. north of Kalavryta, after a curve in the road, the rocks tower imposingly above us in a multitude of colours, and if we look up we will be amazed by the sight of the monastery of **Mega Spileo**, which stands nestled in the mountain's embrace. The nature here is fantastic and the visitor will be stunned by this unique beauty. The place owes its name to the morphology of the terrain, which lies along the west branch of the Aroania range at an altitude of 924 m. at a point where a west-facing cavity has been formed at the foot of a huge rock. This holy place is considered to be the most ancient monastery of Greece. It was built in 362 AD by the brothers Symeon and Theodoros. In the past, the monastery was repeatedly destroyed by wars and fires. The view is the most beautiful gift that the monastery can bestow, since the building stands at such an altitude, while a huge fortress-like eight-storey building stands in the cavity of the huge rock. This legendary

monastery has been part of the fabric of Greece for seventeen centuries.

The monastery temple, which was built in the 17th century, has beautiful frescoes, though a little



faded, a mosaic floor and a bronze door with relief representations. The image of the Virgin Mary, which is made of mastic and wax and is one of the three that the Evangelist Luke made, is kept in

Mega Spileo. Major Christian relics, saints' relics, Byzantine Gospels decorated with enamel, coverings, and many sacred vessels are kept in the monastery's treasury. An ascending path that

begins from the monastery leads to the top of the rock, where there are remnants of a tower and some cannons. With all these joys that nature and history hold for us, no one is 'allowed' to go to Kalavryta and not visit the Mega Spileo. Upon returning to Kalavryta, we relax by having a coffee in the square and right after, we buy our tickets for the cog train.

An unparalleled and unique experience awaits us.

THE COGGED RAILWAY – THE VOURAIKOS GORGE

Tickets in hand, we take our seats on the wagons. Having heard so much about the cogg railway, we are filled

with excitement and emotion about what we are going to see.

The train slides downward on the rails and when the gradient is steep, it pushes out its teeth and clings on to the specially designed rails. The



same happens when it goes uphill. This is how its name can be explained.

It is the narrowest cogged railway of Europe – the gauge is 75 cm. and the distance it covers is 23 km. Along the route, there are three sections of 3 600 metres with double cogged grip.

It is the most beautiful natural monument of Kalavryta, and, in my opinion, of Greece in general, and perhaps one of the most beautiful in the world. The itinerary is of unique beauty, both in winter or in any other season; each season has a tremendous capacity to fascinate the visitor.

The course across the snowy landscape, next to the river and through the tunnels and galleries, is quite unimaginable for those who have not experienced it. In the autumn, too, the colours of the plane leaves that are reflected in the waters of Vouraikos generate a desire inside us to become poets and painters. It is a unique moment accompanied by a unique feeling. No matter how many times you travel on that cog train, you will always feel an unprecedented emotion, because each time will be like the first. This is the magic and the uniqueness of this train.

This might be the first time that wild natural beauty has been combined so

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harmoniously with technology. This is a route that is known the world over, and a landscape that fascinates even the most demanding visitor.

Vouraikos gorge was created from the efforts of the river Vouraikos, which was called Erasinos in ancient times, to find a way out for its waters. This familiar natural process created a wonder. In 1889, Harilaos Trikoupi, Greece's Prime Minister, signed the contract for the construction of the line. The project was regarded as very innovative at that time, if one considers the means used and the difficulties and obstacles that had to be surmounted. The cog train began to operate in 1896 and, for a long time, it was the only way that the residents of Kalavryta could reach the sea. The cogged railway is a centre of attraction for tourists and trippers and, at the same time, a unique means to make the mountainous province of

Kalavryta famous all over the world. It is not by accident that many international magazines have at times featured articles about the cog train. It is also worth mentioning that not even the slightest of accidents has happened in the 107 years that the railway has been in operation. Currently, there are proposals to extend the line in order to reach Agia Lavra and the ski centre, a project which would give the train a new lease of life, but a very difficult one to achieve in the opinion of many. The village of Zachlorou (= much flora), which is situated in the gorge at an altitude of 640m, is totally drowned in greenery and has picturesque houses and little tavernas. Vouraikos gorge and the cogged railway are a unique way to advertise not only Kalavryta, but also Greece.

Before we go back to our base, a visit to Tsivlou Lake will fascinate us.

TSIVLOU LAKE

There are three different roads which lead to this charming and unique lake.

One starts from Kalavryta, reaches the ski centre, turns left and ends at the Lake after going through **Peristera** village. It is worth stopping for a while in this small beautiful village and enjoying a sweet dipped in syrup and an original Greek coffee under the tall and age-old plane trees, while gazing at the whole area from up there. This square is, in fact, a large balcony with a unique view.

The other road begins from Akrata, a seaside village near the national Athens-Patras road. The road goes through the villages of **Pyrgos** and **Valimi** and ends up at the lake.

The third route, which is also the best, takes us through **Souvardo**, but can be difficult for some cars. You need a jeep or a utility vehicle, as the road after Souvardo is a dirt track with a lot of uphill and downhill slopes, ditches and stones, left there after the winter waters have dried up.

However, the trip through gorges, streams, tall trees, colours, past large herds of animals and huge sheep dogs will compensate the visitor.

This route also starts from Kalavryta. We follow the north-bound road to Mega Spileo and 8 km. further on we come across a sign that directs us to the right towards **Vrahni**. We follow the direction of the sign and we start ascending. The road has many bends, which can be very difficult on snowy days, but the view of the valley of Vouraikos fascinates us. After a few kilometers, we reach the village of Vrahni, which lies embraced by the hill. The village is attractive throughout the year. We then continue towards Souvarado. A kilometer further along we can see the first houses of the village, and moving on we reach a beautiful square with the church of Prophet Elias standing on its side. In the summer, the square is full of people, and feasts often take place under the gorgeous plane tree. The village also has two picturesque little churches, Saint Athanasios and Saint Demetrios.

If it is summer, then a coffee in the shade of the plane tree is just what you need. If it is winter, we just keep going because we will not meet anyone. Leaving the square behind us

and looking straight ahead, we can see a little house, stuck on the huge rock like an eagle's nest. I have had the good fortune to stay in this house on several occasions and, most importantly, in all seasons. The view from there is fantastic, especially in the mornings when the fog slowly lifts off the valley and the sun spreads a sweet and unique light. Souvarado is a mountainous settlement in Kalavryta and is situated at an altitude of 1210 m. It has six water springs and a dense fir forest. It is built on a slope of Mount Helmos and looks like a multi-coloured kite flying in a green sky. It is ideal for both hiking and relaxing.

The fairy-tale-like lake lying in the middle of fir trees is a rewarding sight. The landscape is dream-like; magic

Keeping a sweet aftertaste of this beautiful village, we continue towards the lake. From here on the course becomes more difficult but is of unprecedented beauty. After we have travelled through wild nature where bare rocks constantly alternate with lush green slopes, we come in sight of paradise. The fairy-tale-like lake lying in the middle of fir trees is a rewarding sight.

The landscape is dream-like; magic. It is hard to imagine that one can find water at this altitude and amidst rocks and fir trees. The lake is ideal to swim in, provided one is not afraid of water snakes. My friends have become familiar with them and they feel at ease when they swim. This is where our tour ends. We hate having to leave. Kalavryta, with all its beautiful and picturesque surroundings, gave us the stimulation to look for 'ports we've never seen before' or 'have seen before'... Whichever we choose, the joy will always be unique... ■

